

Christian Theology and Comparative Religion

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A FEW years ago the editor of one of our best journals of theology, with a rare ability to discern the signs of the times, told us that in his judgment the problem certain to tax most sorely the Christian Apologetic of this generation is the problem created by the science of Comparative Religion. His foresight has been justified. Indeed, the present situation of theology exemplifies the justice of the aphorism—Mr. Balfour's, I think—that nothing changes its form so rapidly as Apologetic, unless it be the negative assault which Apologetic has to meet. Christian doctrine is being challenged to-day to justify immemorial claims of a unique kind—the claim to stand by itself, and to deal with a

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subject-matter which is the measure of all value and all reality. It is encountering the objection, not new in substance, but new in tone, that there are many other voices in the world than the voice of Galilee, and that none of them is without signification. Is not, men are asking, the outcome of an impartial examination of the needs and utterances of the religious consciousness simply this, that Christianity takes its place alongside of other faiths whose claims are scarcely less imperious, and that we remit to the future, and to the arbitrament of the struggle for existence, the open question as to its absolute pre-eminence and its possible replacement by a faith more perfect still?

At present, however, I do not propose to discuss this problem abstractly, or as it might be argued polemically by thinkers who decline the Christian name; we will consider it rather as it bears upon the present internal state of theology itself. A new school of writers, of remarkable and sometimes brilliant ability, has recently drawn together, bent on forcing this question to the front; and on the banner they have raised is inscribed the legend of a new *method*—"the Method of Comparative Religious History," or, as it is in German, *die religionsgeschichtliche Methode*. Though not without adherents in this country—one may name Dr. J. G. Frazer and Dr. Percy Gardner—their main strength lies in Germany. Abandoning the reserved and individualistic habits of most German theologians in the past, they have deliberately addressed themselves to the larger

public, with a striking measure of success, some of their shorter books having attained a really wide circulation. Several joint undertakings have issued from their united forces, such as a well known series of tracts for the people on Religious History, which has evoked from the positive party a counter series; a new popular commentary on the books of the New Testament, with fresh translations and introductions, edited by Professor Johannes Weiss of Marburg; and a modern Handbook to the New Testament, comprising not only a closely-packed commentary on the whole, but an elaborate literary and historical introduction and a concluding volume of practical exposition, the entire work being under the editorship of Professor Hans Lietzmann of Jena. Names better known in Britain are those of Wernle, whose *Beginnings of Christianity* has made an impression here; Bousset, whose recently translated book on *Jesus* was much the most popular of the "Tracts on Religious History," and who had for some years been known as a distinguished expert in Jewish apocalyptic; Weinel, editor of still another series of minor works upon the problems of life, whose *St. Paul*, rendered into English within the past year, is a modern and telling, if not very profound, book; Gunkel, in some ways the most attractive of them all, though hitherto inaccessible to English readers; and Jülicher, whose *Introduction to the New Testament* was lately translated by Miss Ward, and whom his friends class with Wellhausen and Harnack for scholarly distinction. I have also

been told that many of the younger men readily confess an intellectual debt to one whose name is all but unknown with us, Professor Eichhom of Kiel, a Church historian whose literary work has been impeded by persistent ill-health, but whose conversation has planted germinative thoughts in other minds.

It may be worth our while to consider patiently what these men have to say, for, to quote Dr. Sanday, "what Germany is saying to-day, many circles in Europe and America will be saying to-morrow." The question they are dealing with is, briefly, the sources of New Testament teaching, and their common attitude may fairly be expressed in Gunkel's words.

211 Christianity, he says, is really a syncretistic religion; or, as he puts it somewhat more precisely in another place, "the religion of the New Testament, in its origin and its shaping, fell under the influence of alien religions in important points, and even in some points that are essential."¹ Protestants are familiar enough with the idea that the doctrine and practice of the Ancient Catholic Church, say in the third or fourth century, are nearly unintelligible unless we allow for strong forces of a pagan origin; but what the modern school argues is that the mischief began much further back, and that things went wrong in the apostles' lifetime. The descent dates from the New Testament itself. Accordingly, we must put aside the presuppositions on which

¹ *Zum religionsgesch. Verständnis d. NT.*, p. 1.

Biblical Theology has commonly rested; we must, so to speak, withdraw the privileges of the New Testament, which is not "a holy island in the sea of history," but only part of the main continent of early Christian literature. Hence what we want instead of New Testament Theology is a history of primitive Christian thought, most of which is religion, not theology at all. Put the books of the New Testament back, it is said, into vital relation with the general religious phenomena of their time, exhibit them as pervaded with the human feeling and speculation about divine things of which the world was then full, and their contents will acquire a vividness and glowing reality which must be lacking when you insist on a kind of sacred insulation. Perhaps an example of this method at its best is Bousset's commentary on the Apocalypse published some ten years ago. The author does not merely ask what the Greek words mean; he goes behind the words, and inquires, Where have all these figures come from, the seven spirits and the vials, the four and twenty living creatures, and the rest? And he answers that not merely was much of this material ready-furnished by Jewish tradition and long crystallized in the conventions of apocalyptic, but that it came to Jewish tradition ages before from Babylonian mythology. And other writers, with perhaps less judgment than Bousset, have since ranged through the New Testament declaring that in this and that and that other strain of doctrine they detect clear traces of the religions of Egypt,

Syria, Persia, Greece,—alien theologumena which, through the medium of Judaism, have entered and gone to mould even apostolic thought.

So far we are within the domain of exegesis, but it is obvious that the same principles demand to be applied to systematic theology. And when they are so applied, as by an uncompromising thinker like Troeltsch, the result is rather staggering. Christian Theology, we are told, must give place to the general Science and Philosophy of Religion, Christianity ranking simply as one faith among the rest, though no doubt relatively higher than them all—to be analysed and estimated by the same historical and psychological methods as we employ in other parts of the field; and the re-arrangements which this indicates with tolerable plainness in the character and constitution of the Faculty of Theology in our Universities and Colleges should be at once carried out. This comparison of the religions of the world will determine our ultimate beliefs. So far the new school has not yet produced a Dogmatic, but already we can see what it will be like when we have it. It will be the outcome of a temper which is certainly more interested in religion than in doctrine, and in religion more as consisting of pious feeling, which is pretty much the same wherever you find it, than in any particular beliefs with which it may be associated. As one writer puts it: “the first and real object of theological science is religion proper; it is only after we have studied religious life itself that we ought to turn to institutions and doctrines, to church

and theology, which are merely the deposits and excrescences of religion."² Our first duty, in other words, is sympathetically to realize, and to describe with precision, the free, original movements of the soul, in their unspoiled freshness, refusing to linger by the stream of piety as its channel widens into settled creeds and institutions, and ascending to the very fountain of religion, where it wells up from the creative depths of primitive personal life. Feelings, moods, emotional consciousnesses or psychoses, which from their very nature spurn every attempt at doctrinal formulation,—these are the elements which really make up the religious experience or attitude in every age and land; but if you try to distil them into theoretical conceptions, suitable to be arranged in orderly paragraphs, the inevitable upshot is a fatal loss of spontaneity and force. This is equally true of Christianity and of other faiths.

The general programme, then, is clear. If we take the two words "Religious History" and lay the stress on the adjective *religious*, we get one main principle of the modern school: their aim is to bring out the hopes, fears, wishes, prayers, raptures of piety as the primary element, and to put ideas, propositions, doctrines into the second and derivative place. It would scarcely be unjust to call the point of view aesthetic. If, however, we lay the stress on the substantive *history*, we get the other main principle: they are resolved upon the thorough-going

² Weinell, *Die Wirkungen d. Geistes u. d. Geister* p. v.

application of scientific historical method in the study of religious language and religious thought. And by historical method is meant three things—the principle of *criticism*, or the repudiation of all traditional authority, the principle of *analogy*, by which phenomena far asunder in time and space are linked together, and the principle of *correlativity*,
 214 which is the foe of all isolation whether of person or event, and insists upon the fact that history is a seamless robe, in which all threads are woven indissolubly together. Throughout the exposition of these principles by some of the more prominent writers we can trace the influence of the idea, more often tacitly followed than openly avowed, that historical methods will answer all the questions a theologian has any right to ask. Their conception of the realities with which history deals is likewise such that they really confine their attention to what we may call the immanent action of God, and turn their blind eye upon the fact of His supernatural transcendence, together with the possibility of miracle. To the idea of a religion that is absolute and final they prefer the thought of an infinite evolution.³ It is probably due to the ecclesiastical situation in Germany that many of them should also have a good deal to say about the crying need to

³ Cf. Häring, *Dogmatik* (1906), p. 80. It is scarcely possible to speak too highly in praise of Häring's book. It is probably the most important general work in its department which we have had from Germany for the past fifteen years, with the possible exception of Kähler's *Wissenschaft*.

emancipate theology from the Church, The dignity and impartiality of science, it is said, is seriously compromised by the connexion. It is intolerable that the results of a scientific inquiry should really be decided beforehand by the interests of faith; they might just as well be announced at once without the formality of historical discussion. The notion that German critical theologians have ever been restrained by undue tenderness for the plain man's feelings is certainly one which possesses much of the charm of novelty, and may be humorously meant; but apart from individual extravagance, there is not a little in the protest with which we, as Protestants, can sympathize. Only in Romanism are theology and the decisions of the Church bound to coincide. But to any one who holds that religion is a personal affair, not an impersonal institution, it is not new that theology must be free to discover truth, and that if new facts are brought to light, the decisions of the Church must be modified accordingly. On the other hand, members of the modern school are rather prone to ill-considered observations as to the impossibility of a Church theology which shall also be genuinely scientific—an unreasoning position unless science means only pure mathematics.

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Now, is it possible to point out formative influences which have gone to make this new theory? I think it is. The first place, obviously, must be given to the amazing growth of the science of Comparative Religion during the last fifty years. The impulse which this science received from Hegel

is not yet spent, for despite the faultiness of much of his classification he did more than any other to introduce rational order into a study rather conspicuously in need of it. He taught men to range freely and seriously through religions other than their own, with some kind of clue in their minds. Then scientific philology has much to answer for; it has created noble collections like the Sacred Books of the East, and translated monuments and inscriptions in countless tongues. On every hand the field has been immensely widened. Old Testament study has opened out into Assyriology with its kindred disciplines. Much that is illuminating has been written upon the religions of classical antiquity. As long ago as 1889 the late German philologist Usener issued a work which, in the light of what has happened since, almost deserves to be styled epoch-making—his *Studies in Religious History*, in which he sought to retrace the paths which may be followed backward from our Christian present to the religious world of Greece and Rome. What has been doing for twenty years past to light up the confused pagan faiths of the Graeco-Roman civilization—the worships of Serapis, Baal, Mithras, Helios, Jupiter—we may find in the works of a scholar like Professor Dill; and it reads like an exhumation of the soul. Furthermore, we have lately seen a remarkable elaboration and perfecting of historical method. Sympathetic fancy of a higher order has been applied to alien civilizations, the horizon of interest has been pushed back, a finer touch for psychological analysis has been

developed, the sense of analogy is quickened; all, of course, with a reflex influence upon the study of religion. And when we look across into the neighbouring field of philosophy, we find a temper prevailing in many quarters which owes something to men like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, with their fierce reaction against the prejudices and even the morality of the past, their sentimentality, their subtle and imaginative curiosity. Thus, to quote the words of one observer, there has grown up "a new romanticism, the intellectual spirit which is able and willing to think itself by feeling and imagination into any and every kind of mental experience, but neither able nor willing to find anywhere a firm resting-place and foothold, such as should make possible clear judgment and resolute progress."⁴ This is combined with a view of cosmic development which not only conflicts with the Christian faith in revelation, but is definitely constructed so as to bar it out. Evolution rules the world, and there is no more to be said. Take these influences together, and I think we have the main sources from which the presuppositions of the modern school are drawn. When the narrative of Christ's life comes up for inspection, such things are bound to affect their estimate of the probability of a miracle, or the authenticity of a saying. They modify a man's view of evidence.

It is the soul that sees: the outward eyes

⁴ Reischle, *Theologie u. Religionsgeschichte*, p. 16.

Present the object; but the mind describes.

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We are reminded of the caution urged by Dr. Hort: "Criticism is not dangerous except when, as in so much Christian criticism, it is merely the tool for reaching a result not itself believed on that ground, but on the ground of speculative postulates."

Beyond these, in the main, non-theological influences we can also trace a real connexion between the new theory and the theological system of Albrecht Ritschl. Roughly, but not unfairly, we may say that it represents the extreme left wing of Ritschlianism, and is the culmination of a good deal of discontent with some of the master's positions. Thus Ritschl always tended to isolate the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ, with a narrowness that disturbed people far more orthodox than he; and it was not long before certain of his more impatient disciples began to feel the restriction intolerable. Once the first step in rebellion had been taken by linking afresh ties which bind the New Testament revelation to the Old, the question rose quite naturally as to the possibility of affiliating the Christian religion, at all events in part, to other ethnic faiths. Again, just because Ritschl made the person of Jesus so absolutely central in faith, it was bound to be asked, and very soon it was asked with growing insistence, whether this is compatible with the historical knowledge of His life which we actually possess. Had Ritschl's use of history not been a trifle violent and imperious? Did not his exegesis too often savour of caprice? For

example, he had made the Kingdom of God, taken in a purely ethical sense, the basis of his theological system; but what if the New Testament idea of the kingdom were really eschatological? Again, his rigidly negative attitude to philosophy satisfied men less and less as time went on. Religion must come to terms somehow with reason, it was felt; and to take a merely intransigent position was to court disaster. You cannot win men for the Gospel by appealing to them not to use their minds. Once more, people began to say, after a time, that the Ritschlian love of system is a thing which the modern mind will simply not endure. It is a limitation in the master to be so severe, deductive, organic; he is too complete, settled and rounded for the thought of to-day—far more complete, indeed, than experience itself. There ought to be room for the breadth, the fulness, the infinite variety of the religious experiences men do actually have, and for the numberless problems urged upon us by the complexity of life and knowledge. We can understand that it was the younger men, mainly, who felt and expressed these objections. They had not groaned under the burdens that Ritschl helped to lift from the shoulders of a former day. So they protested that he gave them little or no lead in meeting the problems of the new generation; in particular they complained that he afforded no help to men confronted with the great modern idea of evolution which science takes, and must take, to embrace everything knowable, and which therefore has a *prima facie* claim to reinterpret

Christianity itself. Anyhow, we must cease to isolate our religion artificially. Its meaning is clearest when we set it full in the stream of universal religious history. The whole duty of a theologian is first to work himself, as a historical exegete, into the world of New Testament, or rather primitive Christian, ideas; next to realize, as a serious thinker, that these ideas are long past and gone, and exercise no authority over the modern mind. But no one need be afraid of subjectivity. Man is religious by his very make; and to say that without Christ we should be atheists is only a counsel of despair.

219 The movement whose antecedents I have sketched is worthy of close consideration, I think, for several reasons. For one thing, it shows how mistaken is the opinion sometimes expressed by otherwise well-instructed persons, that what we should call negative criticism played its last card in Strauss, Renan and the author of *Supernatural Religion*, was refuted duly by men like Tholuck and Lightfoot, and after that had no more that it could do. Nothing could well be more unlike the facts. Negative criticism is still with us, and will be with the Church to the end. It does not appear to be the will of God that it should ever cease. Only this summer a new work appeared, by a young Strassburg scholar,⁵ in which he reviewed literature upon the Life of Jesus in the last century and a half; and his independent conclusions are summed up

⁵ Schweizer, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*.

under these three heads: (a) the supernatural is incredible; (b) the Fourth Gospel is valueless as history; (c)—and this is the point we should especially note—the gist of Jesus' teaching is eschatological delusion. Again, the movement I am discussing is propagandist in spirit, and, although the tide is already ebbing in Germany, its ideas are steadily making way here. And yet again, we are dealing with a conscious and excessively able attempt to render Christianity palatable to the modern mind, which proceeds by bringing our faith relentlessly under the rules of a general religious evolution. In a large measure, it endeavours to secure what is valuable in the Gospel by taking ideas from it and dissolving its historical facts.

Turning now to estimate the worth of these conceptions, we shall all concede that immense gains may accrue to theology from the psychological study of religion. For correcting the doctrinaire and impotent abstractions to which theology is so prone, no method is more natural or more unfailing. What are the hopes and fears and joys of the religious mind, or the mind that is trying to be religious, and how precisely these are removed or modified or perfected by faith in Jesus Christ, is a theological question of first-class importance, as every missionary and preacher is aware. Anything to save us from talking formulae in the pulpit! Anything to remind us of the manifold idiosyncrasies of the human soul, to make impossible a religion that lives only in books, to set us upon the task of discovering the precise aspect of

the Gospel which means healing and salvation for a given mind. The more psychology the better, then; only it must be with two reservations touching the manner in which the modern school has combined it with the methods of historical science. First, in the study of religious mental phenomena it is their way to put what seems to me a seriously wrong emphasis upon the rudimentary and ecstatic, as well as upon: experiences that are abnormal and exceptional; as though the more elementary, and, so to speak, childish, a pious feeling is the more characteristically Christian is its type. This comes out especially in some valuable recent investigations into the New Testament doctrine of the Spirit. To go down to the depths is thus identified or confused with going back to the beginning. Mystery is taken to be what specifically constitutes the religious frame or mood, and now and then the remark is added that in these deepest and most ineffable feelings all religions are really one. And so, the minds of these writers having come to be pre-occupied, almost imperceptibly, with phenomena of enthusiasm, awe, ecstasy, and tremulous excitement, such as occur in every religious society, they are apt to settle upon these as the essence of the matter, and in consequence to insist that walls which have been dogmatically raised between Christianity and other faiths shall straightway be thrown down. No supernatural interposition is required to account for the emotions we have been accustomed to regard as specifically Christian; they are all explicable by the known laws of psychi-

cal life, viewed as a self-contained and internally determined sphere, which needs and indeed tolerates no such intrusions. The attitude is, in many respects, identical with that familiar to the English reader in Professor James of Harvard's captivating and vivacious book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. 221

Secondly, this method of religious psychology applied to history gives us not the slightest help in deciding questions of *truth* in the objective sense. Of course we know beforehand that every religion has its subjective aspect; it takes shape in emotions, ideas, beliefs which form a part of the mental life of its adherents; and in this respect Christianity is undeniably like its neighbours. Yet the most accurate psychological examination of these ideas and beliefs has so far no bearing whatsoever upon their real validity, nor on these lines do we get one step nearer to settling *that*. Not only so; you cannot tell, by purely historical methods, whether one religion is higher than another, or pronounce one stage in the religious development of a people an advance upon the preceding stage. For any such judgment some criterion of truth and value must be accessible. Now it has usually been held that the peculiarity—as logicians say, the differentia—of Christianity is that it presents not a subjective aspect merely of beliefs and hopes toward God, but also an objective reality corresponding to the faith of man, and in the last analysis creative of it. There *is* no Pantheon answering to the conception of the Greek; but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

both is, and is a rewarder of those that seek Him. But if this be so, it is futile to talk as though Greek religion and Christianity were virtually on one level, and could be freely used to criticize or to confirm each other, all ideas of a revelation of grace being meanwhile put in abeyance. In short, this kind of psychological description has no interest in truth as such; it is concerned only with what happens, not at all with its meaning. Hence it would scarcely be
 222 too much to say that the method we are discussing is, in its rigour, valueless for systematic theology, except upon terms that would be simply ruinous. Either it must stick uniformly to the principles of pure history, judging everything by analogy and correlativity, and then it has no point of contact with a Dogmatic which takes it as its province to vindicate the Christian view of things as *true*; or it must introduce, irrelevantly, the particular personal convictions of the thinker, and it then becomes a question whether *they* are provable.

Perhaps the far-reaching changes of perspective which the Christian mind is thus called on to make are seen most dearly when we note that on the new theory we must surrender the claim of Christianity to be absolute. It is not merely that the definite lines of Christian doctrine that Ritschl drew so firmly are dissolved, and the supernatural character of the Gospel as a Divine Father's personal message to the sinner veiled in obscurity; it is not merely that we are forbidden any longer to describe Christianity as the true faith, and other faiths as false. In a sense,

this last might not disquiet us greatly, for Christianity is too majestic to live upon the depreciation of rivals. It is not for us to be narrower than St. Peter, when he said that "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of Him." But it is to be observed that we are bidden to lay aside the doctrine that the Christian religion is perfect and absolute, even in the form in which that doctrine was asserted by idealistic philosophers of a past generation, like T. H. Green. We cannot and ought not to say that Christianity is absolutely true, for history is the domain of the relative only. We may stretch a point and concede that Christianity is the best religion which has yet appeared; we may even allow that it would be practically difficult or impossible to conceive a better; nevertheless, like the past, the future may be rich in surprises. And after all, would an absolute religion do more for us than is done by the highest attainable? We may still rejoice in the truth that has been granted us; we may still believe that Christianity has a place all to itself in the plan of God. But in no case must we transgress the limits of historical knowledge. 223

The only answer to most of this is to say that Christianity stands or falls with the claim to be absolute. We do not judge it by other faiths, but all other faiths by it. "In Thy light do we see light." This is a conviction with which theology tampers only at the cost of sacrificing its own *raison d'être*; for in the last resort what theology exists to do is to

make articulate the affirmations of faith. Take away the certainty that the Christian gospel is something by itself,—God Himself its centre, the love of God its very heart, the power of God flowing freely through its operations, and the egoistic taint that clings to every other religion purged out,—take away this certainty, and the roots of human faith in salvation are cut. The need of revelation, the gravity of sin, the infinite potentialities of personality: it is the one thing sure to the Christian mind that Jesus Christ deals adequately with them all. How long could we continue to believe in missions, or urge the missionary enterprise, except in the clear assurance that we are in a position to offer men what is better than the best they have, or dream of having? Surely the truth is rather with the writer who pleads that God's providential action may be seen in the fact that the vast increase in missionary enthusiasm witnessed by our generation is exactly contemporaneous with an unprecedented advance in the science of Comparative Religion; as though to persuade men who otherwise might doubt it of the absolute position of the faith of Christ amid human beliefs. In short, those who ask us to give up the absolute character of the Gospel fail to realize what their proposal signifies for practical religion.

224 But of course the denial of the absolute nature of Christianity rests ultimately on a denial of the absolute nature of Christ Himself. Accordingly we find that the category under which the modern school brings Him is that of the religious genius or

hero or prophet. It is a conception which was first acclimatized in theology by Strauss, and fostered by Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-worship*; and that it has its uses it would be foolish to deny. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews employed it when he described our Lord as the Author and Finisher of faith, although he did not stop there. What we are bound to note, however, is that it is a category which includes others beside Jesus, and therefore is condemned before the Christian mind as a full or adequate interpretation of His person. It shuts out blankly everything in Jesus that is unique and incomparable, and offers no reason at all why we should join with the New Testament in naming Him Lord and Redeemer. Furthermore, to scholars like Wrede or Bousset practically every fibre in the New Testament conception of Christ can be accounted for historically, and labelled with its theological pedigree. There was a vague Messianic idea in the world, the argument runs; there was a kind of redemption-myth current in pious minds scattered over the Roman Empire in a hundred varied forms, and these impalpable, yearning dreams of salvation were deposited, like crystals in a super-saturated solution, on the idealized name of Jesus of Nazareth. It came to be believed that He had done and suffered all things expected of the Christ. You can explain what was thought of Him from the fermenting ideas of the time; Eastern Gnosticism and syncretistic Judaism will virtually cover the whole field. The conception of a divine Saviour who came down

225 from heaven and returned thither is one whose intellectual antecedents we know exactly, and nothing could have been more natural than its appropriation by adoring believers, eager to deck the object of their faith with all possible names of honour. In a word, any one can see that here we have, risen from a state of suspended animation, the old distinction between the principle of redemption and the Person of the Redeemer, which used to be familiar in the idealistic theologies of last mid-century, and has come up again rather unexpectedly in quite new surroundings.

Now at this point a careful line must be drawn between that which Christian faith is bound to deny and the new historical knowledge it will be wiser to accept. For example, it is supremely credible that the minds of the Gentile world had been providentially prepared for some of the sublimest ideas of the New Testament. Thus the pre-existence of Christ had a way made for it, however roughly and imperfectly, into the Greek intelligence, by the mythical idea of gods who assumed human form. Again, it is an ascertained fact that on Greek soil there existed rudimentary forms of a conception which ultimately took perfect shape in the believing mind as identification with Christ; for, as Professor Menzies has pointed out, "the Greek world knew at this time many a cult in which the deity was held to take possession of his worshippers, and to urge them by an inner impulse to all that his service required. If Greek religion was poor in moral

guidance, it was strong on the side of sympathetic inspiration."⁶ These things, I repeat, are ascertained facts, and it is surely no hard matter to find a place for them under the great apostolic thought that the Father sent forth His Son in the fulness of the times, when in language, in ideas, in civilized social order, in moral aspiration and in moral failure, the world lay ready for Him, and was stretching forth empty and pathetic hands. But it is another thing to say that this explains the New Testament view of Christ. In point of fact it does so no more than the compositor's case of type explains the poem, or the quarryman's block explains the statue. These forms of art require the creative touch of poet and sculptor, and, equally, the apostolic faith in Jesus required the touch of His creative personality. Why, indeed, should they have fixed upon this Jesus, and said such things of Him as that in Him both heaven and earth consist and have their being, or that in Him all the fulness of the Godhead dwells, except it be that He had made upon them such an impression that no less or lower words would serve? They had eaten and drunken with Him and seen Him die; His weakness and mortality had not been concealed from them; yet they named Him the Lord, the image of the invisible God, the First and the Last, and did so not after a long, dark, suspicious interval which made anything possible, but from the days of the primitive Christian society. It is surely a question

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⁶ *St. Paul's View of the Divinity of Christ*, p. 30.

of sufficient gravity how you are to account for the supernatural impression made by Jesus on His contemporaries, if not on the hypothesis that there was something in Him capable of producing it. Certainly if we take Him to be only one more inhabitant of Palestine, resembling His neighbours far more than He differed from them, searching for God as some of them were doing with all the pathetic apparatus of human inquiry, it will not be hard to read the evangelic record of His life as a tissue of improbabilities, to say no more. It will then be easy to conceive His mind as simply "entangled in Judaism," not the master of apocalyptic ideas, but their slave. It will be easy to agree with Wellhausen that Jesus never said, never could have said, that He came to give His life a ransom for many, never bade men take up their cross and follow Him. On the other hand, to put aside the enormous initial difficulty of this theory that the believing view of
 227 Jesus is even older than St. Paul, since it occupied the field immediately after the Resurrection, one can only say that this is one more hypothesis which has been made for the Christian mind, not by it. It is at variance with the one certainty on which faith reposes, which all testimony supports, and which all serious Christian thought assumes, that Jesus is not one of a class, or even the first among His peers, but that which none else can ever be, the truth and power of God for our salvation.⁷

⁷ Cf. Prof. Denney, in the *United Free Church Magazine* for

But the work of the modern school is, as I have hinted, more rewarding in the field of exegesis, and there its insight has been largely to the profit of New Testament study. Thus it lays an explanatory finger upon such things as baptism for the dead in First Corinthians, the cases of death and sickness which St. Paul construes as penalty for unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper, and, as Professor Kennedy of Toronto has shown us, upon a variety of features in the Pauline eschatology. So far as it goes there is real light in Dieterich's observation that "every Greek understood that Paul meant adoption by God as the form of reception into sonship, just as in the Greek cults even before him the rite of adoption was used as the means of reception into the mystic fellowship with the Deity." By such an explanation we are enabled in a sense to watch the apostolic mind at work among its materials, be they inherited or new-born of Christian faith. The new method has also compelled theologians to re-examine the New Testament doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It may even help us slightly with the great Kenosis passage in Philippians ii., and freshen for us St. Paul's usage of the phrase "in Jesus' name." But it makes the common mistake of a young movement, the mistake of exaggeration. In particular it goes so far as practically to identify the form of a Biblical idea with its substance. Thus one writer proves that the formula "the breadth and length and depth and height" is

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to be found in an Egyptian religious incantation, where it denotes a vast flaming space in which the Deity becomes visible and takes up His dwelling; but why this should diminish the force of the same words in *Ephesians*, where St. Paul is speaking of Christ taking up His dwelling in the believing heart by faith, it is not easy to understand. We must not be imposed upon by what is only a specious verbal coincidence. Again, one scholar who has investigated the phrase "in Jesus' name" absurdly underestimates the originality of the Christian usage by pressing the analogy of other worships in which the name of the deity is uttered as a kind of charm. One may utter the name of Jesus, surely, in a variety of ways; by way of a charm, no doubt, if one is superstitious, but also merely because one is thinking of Him, or because one is confessing Him, or because one is praying to Him for help. In short, there is a difference between magic and religion, even when they use the same language. The line taken by the modern school does seem to have a direct bearing, indeed, upon many survivals of old polytheisms which flourish in at least the popular religion of the Roman Church, whose "worship of saints differs from that of the old gods only in a change of name and a partial change of the legends connected with them."⁸ Even there, however, the pagan infection is not preponderant, and in the New Testament it simply does not exist. As has been

⁸ Gwatkin, *The Knowledge of God*, vol. ii.

pointed out, you can only speak of syncretism where the elements of different religions are admitted on *equal terms*; and the person who says that in the New Testament elements of Judaism or Hellenism rank as equally important for the Christian consciousness with the truth as it is in Jesus would, I believe, say anything. That apostolic writers got something, perhaps not a little, of the raw materials of their symbols, metaphors, apocalyptic pictures, from the circles of thought in which they moved, who would care to deny? All ideas have a history; they grow, as the idea of God has grown, from very humble origins; and no one can be surprised to learn that ages before Christ men had been using the words or conceptions atonement, salvation, glory, sin, life, Redeemer. It matters nothing where a Scripture writer got his words, or what their previous atmosphere had been; what does matter is the new meaning he poured into them, and the creative power with which he sent them forth minted afresh in the name of Jesus Christ. But the exegete is certain to go wrong who aims at identifying a New Testament idea with its verbal expression; this is to force upon Biblical authors a realism they would have firmly repudiated, and illegitimately to transform what, at most, are but free and natural analogies to the ideas of other religions, into cases of indirect dependence, or even direct borrowing. 229

Nowhere does this come out more clearly than in what the modern school have to say respecting the New Testament doctrine of the sacraments. As to

the Eucharist, for example, it is held that St. Paul's representation can best be interpreted in the light of the religious realism or materialism of the time. Ideas common to ancient Semitic worships and the mysteries of Mithras are here—ideas of participation in the substance of the Godhead through blood-fellowship, through a sacramental eating of Deity. On these lines recent inquirers have declared that Baptism and the Lord's Supper in St. Paul are religious actions which are effective simply as actions; as belonging, that is, to the realistic and mystical side of experience in contradistinction to what is ethical and personal. Misinterpreting the simple original meaning of Jesus, we are told, the Apostle fell back into the old, ethnic notions of communion with God in physical or quasi-physical ways, rather than through the conscious and ethically mediated act of faith. The minds of all religious men in that age were filled with such ideas, and St. Paul shared them with the rest. I do not know whether High Churchmen will accept this new and unexpected argument in support of their contention that the realistic view of the sacrament is the apostolic view; but for evangelical theology at least the right course is clear. Quite apart from the interesting point as to whether, as good Protestants, to whom Scripture is a guide, not an external law, we should be in duty bound to become ritualists if it were proved that St. Paul is one—quite apart from this, I say, we should have to inquire how any such view could be harmonized with the supreme principle of the

apostle's doctrine of salvation, viz., the absolute sufficiency of simple faith in Christ. Until such a harmony has even begun to be proved, remoter problems need not perturb our minds.

To conclude, it is impossible to deny that the writers I have been discussing have much to impart to us, and that we shall fail to get beyond them if we refuse the new truth they bring. Obviously, a movement like this cannot be warded off by any *ipse dixit* of the Church. The novelty of it breaks in upon the settled peace of theological inertia, to urge us forward, to stir our thoughts, to recall the truth—never far from the minds of serious men—that God fulfils Himself in many ways. Hence, though we may not concede to Wernle that the function of theology is finally to deliver the Church from theologians, as functionaries whose very existence is incompatible with the native freedom of the Gospel; yet we have no difficulty in conceding that one of its tasks is to rid the Church of theologies which are visibly past their best. Nor ought we to forget that these writers are men of profoundly religious feeling, or that to be really religious to-day is to take up one's cross. I believe that their works help to show us how, in Dr. Sanday's words, we may learn "by degrees to think of Christianity, not as something entirely isolated in the world, but as the climax and crown of other religions." Thirty years ago it was customary to assume that hundreds of words in the Greek New Testament were exclusively and technically Christian, whereas to-day we know through papyri and inscriptions

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that they are really normal first-century spoken Greek; and perhaps in this fact the wise may see a parable. It is all for the best that free airs should blow, from time to time, across the fields of exegesis. Fresh study of religious psychology cannot but stimulate Christian life, and enrich alike its practice and its theory. Deepened interest in great religious personalities, whether in the Bible or out of it, is pure gain. Everything is welcome that quickens the consciousness that religion, wherever it has seized and moulded human beings, is a thing that lives and moves. And we may well rejoice to learn how other faiths dimly anticipated, as if in dreams, vast and sublime truths which were destined to break clearly upon the waking consciousness of those who dwelt in the light of Christ. All this enables us to take a wider retrospect of the ways of God with men, aware as we still remain that it is only the pure, lucid melody of the Gospel itself that has trained our ear to catch its faint, premonitory echo in the worships of the Gentiles.

232 Nevertheless, it must be said frankly that the terms which these writers demand, especially in regard to the Person of our Lord, are impossible for all who desire to keep the faith once delivered to the saints. In many ways, as they shuffle and reshuffle old material, they are strangely reminiscent of the eighteenth century, although doubtless there is in their view of things a romantic strain, as well as a living sense of history, to which that urbane and temperate period had not attained. Perhaps,

however, the feature of their theology on which they chiefly pride themselves—its modernity—may prove in the end its undoing; for one has an instinctive feeling that a Christianity reduced to accord with the ideals of Goethe, Carlyle and Bismarck is neither the Gospel that sinners need nor that God in His great mercy has given. A theology of impressionism, for so we may describe their view, is essentially a short-lived theology, and in this case the fate cannot be said to be wholly undeserved. Hence, despite a real desire to be sympathetic, I cannot but conclude by subscribing to Hermann's recent words of grave and measured disapprobation: "Its representatives," he writes regarding the movement I have examined, "its representatives are great as experts in sympathy with the piety of other minds, but the will to have a piety of their own rises with them but seldom to full consciousness. They can show us how the prophets heard the word of God, and how the soul of an apostle is filled with conflict and with peace. They can brush the dust of centuries from the words of Jesus; they can even depict with lofty enthusiasm Jesus' incomparable soul. But there is seldom a token that they have really considered what it means for them, as men, that this victorious Person appeals to them, in such vivid fulness, from the page of Scripture. Had they considered it, they would at least keep silence when others give honour, as Lord, to the Christ who alone has subdued their heart. So long as they lack understanding here they are useless for the work

Christian Theology has to do for to-day.”⁹

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⁹ *Kultur d. Gegenwart* (1906), Teil i., Abth. iv., p. 629.